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SUBJECT: OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN START TWO WEEKS AWAY; KARZAI IN
DRIVER'S SEAT

REF: KABUL 1296

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The presidential election season officially starts June 16, but the major candidates are already in full swing. President Karzai will begin the campaign with a significant head start, having consolidated support from a number of powerful factional leaders. The other major candidates) former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, and Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni) are counting on a last-minute consolidation of opposition campaigns to coalesce under their banner) a seemingly unlikely scenario, for now. Election officials will scrub a handful of candidates after the compliant period ends June 8, though we expect around 40 candidates to appear on the final list. Few candidates outside of the top four appear to have set up a professional campaign infrastructure. End Summary.

Karzai Continues to Build Momentum

12. (SBU) Karzai scored major endorsements last week from the majority-Uzbek Junbesh-e-Milli and majority-Hazara Wahdat-e-Mardum parties. Junbesh, founded by former warlord Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Wahdat, led by influential leader Haji Mohammed Mohaqeq, had agreed earlier this year to endorse a joint candidate (reftel). In a sign of Karzai's growing confidence, the Junbesh/Wahdat alliance had originally demanded five Cabinet positions each for their endorsements. But Karzai refused to commit to such a high price and held out, knowing the ethnic leaders were unlikely to join with United Front candidate Abdullah, even though Abdullah had offered the two parties a wide range of enticements for their support. In the end, sources close to both parties suggest that Karzai's final offer was much lower. An aide to Mohaqeq said Wahdat leaders believed they and Junbesh would each receive three smaller ministries in the new government, though Karzai apparently held to his refusal to put any agreements in writing. Junbesh Deputy Faizullah Zaki told PolOff party leaders had also asked for Karzai's commitment to pursue greater governance reforms in his second term, though again, did not secure any written commitment from Karzai.

13. (SBU) Karzai now has support from most of the country's main regional, ethnic, and political party leaders. He has the support of the only major Uzbek political party, both factions of the largest Hazara party (led by Mohaqeq and 2nd VP Khalili), and prominent individuals from the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e-Islami/United Front group, including 1st VP nominee Marshall Fahim, Herat strongman Ismail Khan, and Balkh Gov. Atta. Major Pashtun tribal leaders are uniformly in his camp, as are Pashtun-majority political parties (and their leaders) such as Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (Party Chairman Abdul Hadi Arghandewal), Afghan Millat (former Finance Minister Anwarulhaq Ahadi), Mahaz-e-Milli (Sufi leader Pir Gailani), and Tanzim-e-Dawat-e-Islami (former warlord and current MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf).

Younger democratic parties have either endorsed Karzai (such as the Republican Party) or remained silent.

¶4. (SBU) Karzai also enjoys a head start to the campaign season. Several opposition camps allege that election officials and government representatives are taking a hard line against activities by opposition candidates that may jump the gun on the June 16 official start of the campaign. Supporters of Ashraf Ghani say local police and security officials tore down their campaign posters in Takhar, while leaving Karzai materials untouched. Mirwais Yaseni told PolOff he has received warnings not to publicize the openings of his regional campaign offices until after June 16. Meanwhile, opposition candidates complain Karzai regularly engages in campaign activities disguised as part of his official duties, such as hosting tribal elders at the Palace, while provincial and district government officials organize pro-Karzai events.

Abdullah Campaign Picks Up Minor Endorsements

¶5. (SBU) Abdullah staffers admit the Junbesh/Wahdat loss is a major blow to the campaign's strategy to consolidate ethnic northern votes. One Abdullah aide spun the development as a decision made by party leaders without the permission of the parties' rank-and-file supporters, who remain committed to the Abdullah campaign. Most Junbesh and Wahdat members who have spoken to the Embassy are not excited about the Karzai endorsement, but understand their leaders' decision to bring the parties into government, rather than remain in opposition for another five years. Abdullah has only picked up

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endorsements from minor parties in the United Front coalition, such as Eqtadar-e-Milli (led by UF spokesman Sancharaki).

Ghani Campaign Sets Up Headquarters

¶6. (SBU) PolOff visited the newly opened Ghani campaign headquarters on May 31 to discuss the state of the election with top Ghani staffers. The busy office was full of petitioners promising support for the campaign in exchange for Ghani's attention to their grievances with the government. Volunteer staff coordinated plans to open offices in other provinces once the campaign season started. Top aide Sabor Formuli said financial constraints meant that many offices would be co-located in supporters' private residences. Formuli acknowledged the campaign had yet to attract support from any other major politicians, but claimed 17 minor presidential candidates had committed to endorsing Ghani after the campaign started. Formuli also pointed to a map of Afghanistan with several hundred red pins and two dozen green pins scattered around various provinces. Formuli said the red pins represented religious, tribal, and political groups that had promised their support to the campaign. The green pins represented groups that campaign staff were "100 percent sure" had committed to the campaign.

Minor Candidates a Non-Factor

¶7. (SBU) Few minor candidates appear inclined to set up a national campaign infrastructure, which would be consistent with the belief of many Afghans that most candidates are running in order to raise their profiles in hopes of being offered a position in the next government. Even sitting members of Parliament Shahla Atta, Ramazan Bashardost, Abdul Qader Imami Ghorri, and Mullah Salaam Raketi have not visibly expanded their campaign effort beyond close supporters and family members. Still, Atta renounced her US citizenship in late May in response to an anonymous complaint filed with the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), and like most other candidates insists she is in the race until the end.

Mohammed Daud Miraki, the last remaining known US citizen in the presidential contest, dropped out on June 1, citing a "lack of transparency" in the election process. An ECC complaint citing his foreign citizenship may have also compelled Miraki to leave the race. The ECC said it would accept renunciations of foreign citizenship dated before June 18. Bashardost and another candidate, Sayed Jalal Karim, have proven most adept at raising their profiles with Afghan media through their endless willingness to provide soundbites and grant interviews.

Campaigns Compete For Jalali Supporters

18. (SBU) Representatives from the top four campaigns have claimed supporters of former candidate Ali Ahmad Jalali have joined their team. However, a top Jalali aide said that while individual supporters have endorsed other candidates, the bulk of Jalali's former team is waiting for a signal from Jalali on which way to go. Jalali campaign manager and Lower House MP Gen. Helaludin Helal said he and other former campaign aides believed Jalali would soon return to Afghanistan with a clear message on his preference in the election. Helal thought Jalali would coordinate with former US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and make a joint announcement in mid-June.
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